

What is reported regarding threats against engaging in *tafsīr* of the Qur’ān by means of opinion (*ra'y*) or being bold in that, and the ranks of the commentators

It is related that ‘Ā’isha said, “The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, did not explain the Book of Allah except for some *āyats* which Jibrīl taught him.” Ibn ‘Atiyya said, “The meaning of this *hadīth* is that it is about the unseen things of the Qur’ān, explaining what is ambivalent (*mujmal*) and the like to which there is no way to uncover except with Allah’s help. Part of that are those unseen matters which Allah has not made known, like the time of the Rising and the number of blasts on the Trumpet and the order of the creation of the heavens and the earth.”

At-Tirmidhi reported from Ibn ‘Abbās that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Fear attributing words to me which you do not know. Anyone who deliberately tells a lie regarding me will take his seat in the Fire. Anyone who speaks about the Qur’ān by own opinion, should take his seat in the Fire.” It is also reported from Jundub that the Messenger of Allah, may

Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Anyone who speaks on the Qur’ān by his own opinion and is right is still wrong.” This is a *gharīb hadīth* in Abū Dāwūd and one of its transmitters is questionable. Razīn added, “Whoever speaks by his opinion and errs has disbelieved.”

Al-Anbārī said in the *Kitāb ar-Radd*, “There are two interpretations of the *hadīth* of Ibn ‘Abbās. One is that someone who speaks on problematic things (*mushkil*) in the Qur’ān by what he does not know, differing from the position of the first Companions and Followers, exposes himself to the anger of Allah. The second, which is the firmer and sounder of the two, is that when someone says something about the Qur’ān knowing the truth to be different, he should take his seat in the Fire.”

Regarding the *hadīth* of Jundub, some of the people of knowledge say that “opinion” here means “whim”. Whoever speaks about the Qur’ān according to his own whims and does not take from the Imāms of the *Salaf* and happens to be right is still wrong since he has judged the Qur’ān by something whose basis is not recognised and is not based on the position of those with expertise in traditions and transmission. Ibn ‘Aṭīyya says, “The meaning of this is that a man is asked about a meaning of the Book of Allah and hurries to explain it by his own opinion without looking at what the scholars have said and what the rules of knowledge like syntax and *uṣūl* demand.” Not included is the explanation of grammarians and linguists of its grammar and the *fuqahā’* of its meaning where each speaks by his *ijtihād* based on the rules of his own branch of knowledge and investigation.

This is sound and more than one scholar prefers it. The one who speaks according to what pops into his imagination and occurs to his mind without seeking evidence for it in the fundamental principles errs. Anyone who derives its meanings by basing himself on the fundamental principles which are agreed upon is praised.

Some scholars said that *tafsīr* is dependent on oral transmission since Allah says, “*If you have a dispute about something, refer it back to Allah and His Messenger.*” (4:59) This is false because the

prohibition against explaining the Qur’ān is either that what is desired is to confine oneself to transmission and not investigate, or it is something else. It is false that what is meant is that no one should say anything about the Qur’ān other than what he has heard. The Companions recited the Qur’ān and differed about its interpretation in some cases. Not all of what they said was what they heard from the Prophet. The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, made supplication for Ibn ‘Abbās and said, “O Allah, give him understanding in the *dīn* and teach him interpretation.” If interpretation is confined to Revelation and Prophetic reports, what is the point of singling him out for that? This is clear and undoubted.

The prohibition against *tafsīr* applies to two instances. The first is when the interpreter has opinion about something on the basis of his nature and passion and, therefore, interprets the Qur’ān according to his opinion and passion in an effort to justify his position. If it had not been for that opinion and passion, that meaning about the Qur’ān would not have occurred to him. This can sometimes be conscious, as in the case of someone who uses some āyats of the Qur’ān to prove the validity of an innovation, when he knows that that is not what is meant by the āyat, but his aim is to confuse his opponent. Sometimes it is done in ignorance which may happen when an āyat can be applied in various ways and his understanding inclines to the meaning which coincides with his position. He prefers that interpretation because of his opinion and passion and so he interprets it according to his own opinion. If it had not been for his opinion, he would not have preferred that meaning.

Sometimes someone has a sound purpose and seeks evidence for it in the Qur’ān and uses what he knows of it as evidence for what he wants, like the one who calls people to strive against a hard heart. Allah says, “*Go to Pharaoh. He has overstepped the bounds.*” (20:24) He points to his heart and suggests that that is what is meant by ‘Pharaoh’ in this āyat. This kind of interpretation is used by some preachers with good motives to make their words effective and encourage their listeners. This is forbidden because it is unacceptable linguistic analogy and is not permissible. The eso-

tericists use the same method to false purposes with the goal of deluding people and calling them to their false beliefs. They use the Qur’ān according to their opinion and position in matters that they absolutely know are not meant. This is one of the aspects of *tafsīr* that is forbidden.

The second instance is when an interpreter hastens to explain the Qur’ān according to the literal meaning of the Arabic without the help of transmission about what the unusual words of the Qur’ān mean and what has been passed down about the ambiguous and interchangeable words, conciseness, elision, concealment and reversal of order it contains. Someone who does not have a firm grasp of the literal *tafsīr* and then sets out to derive meanings by simple understanding of Arabic often errs and joins the company of those who interpret the Qur’ān according to their own opinions.

Transmission is necessary first of all in the primary *tafsīr* so that one avoids error, and then after that one employs understanding and deduction to expand on it. The unusual words which are only understood via transmission are numerous, and one cannot hope to reach the inward before having a firm grasp of the outward. Do you not see that the Almighty says, “*We gave Thamūd the camel as a visible sign (mubṣira) and then they mistreated her*” (17:59)? It means a visible sign and they wronged themselves by killing it. Someone who looks at the literal Arabic might think that it means that the camel could see (*mubṣira*) and therefore not know what they did wrong and how they wronged others and themselves. This is part of elision and concealment. There are many such examples in the Qur’ān. In cases other than these two, there is no prohibition against interpretation, and Allah knows best.

Ibn ‘Atīyya said, “Most of the righteous *Salaf* like Sa‘īd ibn al-Musayyab, ‘Āmir ash-Sha‘bī and others used to be overawed at the prospect of making interpretation of the Qur’ān and would refrain from it out of scrupulousness and cautiousness for themselves in spite of their perfection and precedence.” Al-Anbārī said, “The imāms of the *Salaf* were too scrupulous to explain the problematic parts of the Qur’ān. One supposed that his *tafsīr* might not coin-

cide with what Allah meant and so refrained from speaking. Another feared that he would become an imām in *tafsīr* and people might follow his method, when he might hesitate to explain a single letter according to his own opinion or to err about it and then his follower might say, ‘My imām in the *tafsīr* of the Qur’ān by opinion is so-and-so, the imām of the *Salaf*.’” Ibn Abī Mulayka said, ‘Abū Bakr as-Šiddīq was asked about the *tafsīr* of a letter of the Qur’ān and said, “Which heaven will cover me and which earth will bear me? Where will I go? What will I do if I say about a letter of the Book of Allah other than what Allah Almighty meant?”

Ibn ‘Atīyya said, “Several of the *Salaf* used to explain the Qur’ān and made the Muslims continue in that. As for the beginning of the commentators on whom they relied, there was ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, and he was followed by ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās, who devoted himself to the subject and perfected it. He was followed by scholars like Mujāhid, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr and others. More is transmitted from him in that than is retained from ‘Alī. Ibn ‘Abbās said, ‘What I took of *tafsīr* of the Qur’ān was from ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib.’ ‘Alī used to praise the *tafsīr* of Ibn ‘Abbās and encouraged people to take it from him. Ibn ‘Abbās used to say about himself, ‘An excellent translator of the Qur’ān is ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās.’ ‘Alī said about him, ‘It is as if Ibn ‘Abbās looks at the unseen through a fine curtain.’”

He was followed by ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b, Zayd ibn Thābit, and ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-Āṣ. All that is taken from the Companions has excellent preference because they witnessed the revelation and its descent in their language. ‘Āmir ibn Wāthila said, “I saw ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib speaking. I heard him say in his *khuṭba*, ‘Ask me. By Allah, you will not ask me about anything that will happen until the Day of Rising but that I will tell you about it. Ask me about the Book of Allah. By Allah, there is no āyat but that I know whether it was revealed at night or in the day, revealed on flat ground or on a mountain.’” Ibn al-Kawwā’ rose and asked about *Sūrat adh-Dhāriyāt* (51).

‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd said, “If I knew of anyone with more knowledge of the Book of Allah than me, who could be reached by

mounts, I would go to him.” A man asked him, “Have you not met ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib?” “Yes,” he replied, “I have met him.” Masrūq said, “I found some of the Companions of Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, like pools which water one person, some like pools which water two, and some such that if all people had come to it, it would satisfy them. ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd was one those pools.”

Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī reported that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “The most merciful to my community is Abū Bakr, the strongest in the *dīn* of Allah is ‘Umar, the most truly modest is ‘Uthmān, the one with the most knowledge of judgement is ‘Alī, and the one with most knowledge of the shares of inheritance is Zayd. The one with the most recitation of the Book of Allah is Ubayy ibn Ka‘b. The one with the most knowledge of the lawful and unlawful is Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal. The trustworthy representative of this community is Abū ‘Ubayda ibn al-Jarrāḥ. Abū Hurayra is a vessel of knowledge and Salmān is a sea of knowledge which is not perceived. Vegetation has not shaded nor has the earth supported anyone with a more truthful tongue than Abū Dharr.”

Ibn ‘Atiyya said, “The prominent Followers (*Tābi‘ūn*) included al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Mujāhid, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr and ‘Alqama. Mujāhid studied recitation with Ibn ‘Abbās coupled with understanding the meaning, stopping at every *āyat*. ‘Ikrima and ad-Daḥḥāk followed them. Even if ad-Daḥḥāk did not meet Ibn ‘Abbās, he studied with Ibn Jubayr. As for as-Suddī, ‘Āmir ash-Sha‘bī attacked him and Abū Ṣalīḥ because he thought that they fell short in investigation.”

Then the *tafsīr* was transmitted by just men of every generation, as the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “This knowledge will be carried by just men of every generation, discarding from it the deviation of the excessive, the ascriptions of the falsifiers and the interpretation of the ignorant.” (Abū ‘Umar and others related it). Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī said, “This testimony from the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, shows that Qur’ānic interpreters are scholars of the *dīn* and

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imāms of the Muslims because they guard the *Shari‘a* against deviation and the ascription of falsehood and refute the interpretation of ignorant fools. One must consult them and rely on them in the business of the *dīn*.”